POLITICO-ADMINISTRATIVE TRANSITION AND ECONOMIC CHANGE : PURNEA IN THE 18TH CENTURY

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The History of Purnea district in the latter half of the 18th century, as that of any other in Bengal, is a record of tranisition during which the entire politico-administrative set up was thrown out of gear; whimsical persons with different considerations became the rulers and in the process led to the economic degeneration of the district. By all available accounts[1] the district had enjoyed peace and prosperity at least upto 1756 A. D. when Shaukat Jang the thoughtless Faujdar of Purnea fought a battle at Baldiabari[2] with his cousin Sirajuddaula, the Nawab of Bengal, which resulted in the defeat of the former, weakening of the latter and the economy of the district of Purnea. To complete this process of change came in the post-Plassey 'political revolutions' affecting not only the provincial capital of Bengal but even the far flung areas like Purnea. The situation continued to worsen even after the British accepted the responsibility of the administration in 1769-70 and it may be said that the famine of 1770 marked the culmination of this economic degeneration. As start ing point for this discussion we may turn to the investigative report of George Sustavas Ducarel, the first Supervisor of Purnea, on the decay of the wealth and produce of the district wherein he identified the causes of decay and suggested remedies thereof. This is an uncontrovertible truth that Purnea suffered economically after the affluent days of Saif Khan and Saiyed Ahmad Khan (c. 1722 to 1756) were over. During Saiyed Ahmad Khan's time Purnea yielded annually a revenue of 58 lacs of Rupees but in 1786, i. e., within about two decades, Purnea had not the capacity to yield above six or seven lacs a year and this decay according to Raymond, the translator of Sair-ul-Mutakharin, was 'incredible, as being past all

1. Ghulam Hussain Salim—*Riyaz-us-Salatin*, Calcutta (1912) p. 37.
   Ghulam Hussain Khan—*Sair-ul-Mutakharin*, Vol. II, Calcutta (1902) p. 141.
   R. Mishra—'*Agrarian Economy of Purnea in the 18th Century*' JBRS Vol. LX, Pt. 1-4, Jan. Dec. '74.
2. A place 4 miles north of Manihari in the present district of Katihar.

computation and all conjecture'.[3] The object here is to examine how far the politico-administrative transition was responsible for such economic degeneration.

The foremost aspect of this transition was that the Subadars and the Faujdars were converted into the instruments of carrying on the policy of fiscal squeeze by the British controllers of the state-apparatus in Bengal. Their survival depended not on the administrative merit that they might have possessed but on their ability to collect as much revenue as they could to fulfil the requirements of their mentors[4]. During the period of about thirteen years from 1757 to 1770 no less than eight Faujdars changed hands in Purnea and obvioulsy they had hardly any time to even think of the welfare of the people. They, in fact, only faithfully carried on their assigned task of plundering the district. Mohanlal, the deputy of Sirajuddaula and the successor of Shaukat Jang as Faujdar of Purnea, spent the few days that he remained in the district in collecting wealth and property including fiftyone elephants, many horses and camels as well as women and children belonging to Shaukat Jang or his father Saiyed Ahmad Khan and sent them all to Murshidabad[5]. Khadin Hussain Khan, another Faujdar of Purnea and an aspirant for the masnad of Bengal, revolted in 1760 against the Nawab of Bengal, decided to join the Imperial forces from Delhi that had invaded Bihar and subsequently raised an army of 6,000 cavalry, 10,000 infantry and 40 big and small guns by plundering 'every part of the province without mercy and left the merchants, Zamindars and provincial inhabitants in a state of bankruptcy and poverty from which they never recovered[6]. Similarly Mir Rohiuddin Hussain Khan, another Faujdar of Purnea during this period along with his excessively intriguing and ill-natured associate Asgar Ali Khan continuously oppressed the farmers. Consequently the revenue of the district languished[7]. Like-

3. Sair, Vol. II, F. N. 34, p. 137.

4. N. K. Sinha—*The Economic History of Bengal : From Plassey to the Permanent Settlement*, Vol. II, Ch. IV.

5. Riyaz, p. 369 and Sair, Vol. II, p. 218.

6. *Proceedings of the Controlling Council of Revenue at Murshidabad* dated 26th August 1771.

7. Sair, Vol. III, pp. 30-32.

wise immediately after the receipt of the Diwani rights by the East India Company in 1765 Raja Suchet Roy was deputed as Faujdar of Purnea, who completely disregarding the welfare of the husbandmen laid heavy assessments on the Rayots without considering the 'Patta' or agreement. He had even recourse to fines and other oppressive means for realizing the increased amount actually he had hardly any freedom to do otherwise as he had obtained his appointment by promising to pay 25 lacs of rupees for the same[8]. What was most shocking in all these cases, however, was that the riches collected as a result of such loot and plunder were drained out of Purnea and, according to Ducarel, this economic drain without proportionate returns was one of the major factors that impoverished the district. Ducarel, in the course of his evidence in person before the Board in July 1775, said that since the company spent the revenues mostly on the maintenance of the troops and on an investment for Europe and since there were no troops near about Purnea and there was also no manufacture of importance of Purnea, the District was unjustifiably made to suffer on these accounts[9]. But amidst politico-administrative transition, characterised by callous indifference towards the ruled by the rulers, it could hardly be expected that the Faujdars of Purnea would pursue the policy of the days of Saif Khan and Saiyed Ahmad Khan when 'What was collected here was spent here'[10].

Another aspect of this change was that with unwilling, unscrupulous and weak Faujdars at their head the various revenue collecting agencies and the Zamindar arrogated to themselves certain police, Judicial and executive functions which of right did not belong to them and realised from the people various arbitrary, vexatious and burdensome collection charges and other imposts like 'Nazranas' and 'Balamis' or presents and tributes, 'Ijardaree' or revenue farmer's fee, the charity charges, the Narjkar or subsistence allowance, the Sepoy charge to pay for the Company troops.

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8. Proceedings, dated 13th December, 1770.
   W. K. Firminger (Ed.)—*The letter Copy Book of the Resident at the Durbar at Murshidabad*, 1768-70, Calcutta (1919) P. XXV.
9. R. B. Ramshotham—*Studies in the Land Revenue History of Bengal* 1769-89, London (1926), pp. 69-70.
10. Proceedings, Dated 13th December, 1770.

The traditional cess called 'Bhoni' and 'GUNDAS', 'Roze PIYADA' or daily allowance to the peon, KHORAKI' or victuals, the Abwab Fauidary' or the fines realised by the revenue farmer as a Court of Justice etc. These charges, which amounted to Rs. 12/- or Rs. 14/- lacs, harassed the cultivators beyond description[11]. Some idea of the routine manner in which the local officials were capable of defalcating the revenues can be had from a brief survey of the revenue assessment of Purnea, made from time to time since 1757. According to Grants' estimates the assessment of Purnea in 1757 was Rs. 6,61,327 out of which Rs. 2,17,098 constituted Abwab'[12]. In 1760 when Mir Kasim Ali looked for new sources of revenue to meet the ever increasing demands of the English, the wealthy province of Purnea was one of the first to be examined and reassessed. Then the gross assessment of Purnea rose to Rs. 21,09,415. This revealed that huge amount of Rs.14,72,845 had been concealed from the Bengal rulers[13]. This very well explains the power and independence enjoyed by the officials at the Sarkar and Pargana level during the transitional regimes of the 18th century[14]. This certainty was a tremendous change for during the pre-Plassey days Saif Khan and Saiyed Ahmad Khan exercised strict surveillance over the Zamindars and other persons charged with the duty of revenue collection and keeping them under control always used them for promoting the welfare of the people. Thus the peasants who were drawn to Purnea in the former days of peace and progress 'Quitted the country again in numbers when they no longer found that benefit and the land they occupied went to waste'[15].

A somewhat different aspect of this chaotic administrative transition was that owing to the extortion and justice practised by the revenue collecting agencies the cultivators practised concealment and evasion which deprived the government of its just demands[16]. So the cultivators

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11. *Ibid.*
12. W. K. Firminger—*The fifth-Report*, Vol. I, Calcutta, (1917), p. 7.
13. *Ibid.*, Vol. II, p. 337.
14. R. E. Frykenberg—*Transitional Process of Power in South India*, The Indian Economic and Social History Review, Vol. I, No. 2, 1963. A similar analysis on the basis of information relating to Guntur District is available in this article.
15. Proceedings, dated 13th Dec. 1770.
16. The fifth Report, Vol. 1, p. 398.

not only became poorer but were also forced to have recourse to questionable ways to save themselves from the exactions first of the Faujdars and then also of the administrative functionary class of people, all of whom were almost solely guided by 'quick profit motivation'. The people of this class, having successfully participated in the post-Plassey fiscal squeeze administered by the state, went on gaining strength during the days of revenue farming experiments. New people with bases in the provincial capital entered into this class only to make confusion more confounded[17]. Devi Singh a collaborator of English eversince the days of Plassey was appointed the Diwan of Purnea and Rajmahal. Similarly Raja Kumait Singh was appointed in 1774 A. D. the Diwan of Dinajpur, Rangpur and Purnea with his station at Purnea. This was the time when Purnea was farmed cut in the first instance to two Calcutta banias, Hazuri Mal and Madan Dutta. All these persons of Bania-Diwan class had strong links in Calcutta and for them, the places like Purnea were just happy hunting grounds for amassing riches. Therefore, they had little concern for the people of Purnea, nor were they moved by the aftermath of the disastrous famine of 1770 which had taken a very heavy toll of lives in Purnea and had rendered the district almost desolate. Even amidst such ruinous situation the agents of these farmers had recourse to cxceedingly harsh methods for making collections. Naturally, utter mismanagement and confusion followed[18]. One Durgacharan Mitra, another Calcutta Bania, who became a sharer in the collections of the Purnea farm of Hazuri Mal and Madan Dutta after some times went with two hundred people from Calcutta and forced the inferior and petty

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17. Elsewhere outside the province of Bengal also the role of the Mahajans has been studied and it has been found that their influence in the rural economy was steadily growing throughout the first half of the 18th century and slowly they came to exercise control over the peasant communities. See Dilbagh Singh—*Role of the Mahajans in rural Economy of Rajasthan,* social scientist, Vol. 2, No. 10, May 1974.

18. For a detailed study of the role of this bania-Diwan class in the Politics and administration of Bengal see—Ranjit Sen : '*The Emergence of a service Elite in Bengal in the Second of the Eighteenth century : A new Dimension of collaboration*; Proceedings of the Indian History Congress, 36 session, Aligarh, 1975.

servants collecting rents from the ryots to vacate Rangpur and Purnea[19]. But this hardly provided any relief to the people. This new administrative class was too currupt to put an end to the wailings of the people, who continued to labour under mal-administration for quite sometime.

Thus, during the second half of the eighteenth century when the British were gradually replacing the Mughals as the rulers of India a confusion took over the politico-administrative framework in which there was hardly any controlling authority which could be effective at the Sarkar and Pargana levels and the role of the local officials became all too important[20]. Unfortunately these local officials used all their power to exploit the people and this more than anything else impoverished the district..

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19. N. K. Sinha, Vol. Second (II), p. 76.
20. This is somewhat akin to R. E. Frykenberg's concept of 'anti-state'. See :—The Indian economic and social History review, Vol. I, No. 2, 1963.

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